



## Duxbury Rural & Historical Society

By Paul Murphy

Ford's Store, America's oldest department store, was well known far and wide for an assortment of goods, the most extensive of any store outside of Boston. During the mid-1800s, before the building of the railroad from Boston in the 1870s, the store did its best business, roughly \$200,000 per year.

The store was destroyed by fire in 1921, but a stone marker located just south of the traffic lights (3A-14), on the left side of Tremont St. (Rte. 3A) in Millbrook, indicates where this retail landmark stood.

The Duxbury Rural & Historical Society is featuring a Ford's Store exhibit this summer as a part of "Duxbury's Heritage," starting June 15, at the King Caesar House.

"Duxbury's Heritage" is being coordinated by Alice Hoyt, whose expertise has proven invaluable. Her brother, Fred Potter, a past president of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, is co-chairman. Their combined abilities will ensure the quality and interest of the many exhibits that represent various historic periods or developments. John Brown and Sheridan Kettering of the Cadeaux Shop have assisted Mrs. Hoyt with the decor. Their expertise in colors and decorating have established the coordination needed to enhance the quality of the exhibits.

The Ford's Store exhibit is located in a rustic room on the second floor balcony of the museum. It will contain many articles such as were sold by the department store 100 years ago, nostalgic and interesting to all.

The history behind Ford's Store began for the Ford family in 1818, when Eleazer Harlow "sold to James T. Ford 57 rods of land with a hat shop standing thereon; part of the homestead of the late Dr. Eleazer Harlow." The remaining 14 acres and buildings were sold to James and Nathaniel Ford in 1819. The hat shop became Ford's Store, which was established in 1826, by Nathaniel Ford and his brothers, James and Peleg. This building expanded time and time again. When more space was needed, the 3 brothers bought up some old building and attached it to the north end of the store. The appearance was somewhat similar to an elongated telescope. They enlarged it until it measured 128 feet long and 21 feet wide.

"Duxburyites now living are fond of recalling their visits to the store, and they speak somewhat wistfully of its pungent odor -- a mixture of molasses, kerosene and rum. There was, they say, a delightful mystery about the place, savoring of pirates and rum, and Duxbury children always liked to be sent to the store."

In 1863, (10 years after the death of James T. Ford; when the store's name was changed to Nathaniel Ford and Sons), the enterprising Ford family purchased the mill adjacent to the store, in the valley below, from Alden B. Weston. This included the mill dam and mill privilege, and the woolen factory, and all other buildings -- also about 30 acres of the west side of the brook.

The mill was rich in history. Its oldest part dated from Myles Standish, who, with his own hands, drew up the grant which permitted Seth Southworth to erect this, the first licensed mill in America.

During the War of 1812, the Weston family bought the mill when the British shut off the supply of sail cloth required by the shipbuilders, and promptly organized the Duxbury Woolen and Cotton Manufacturing Company to manufacture their own sail cloth. It was this company who sold to the Ford's in 1863.

Besides owning the store and mill, the Fords operated a sloop, the Mink, which left Duxbury with products of the mill (sacks, yarns, trowels, meal, cloth, and satin, an imitation satin), and returned with raw materials for processing as well as merchandise for the store, but some small supplies came by the stagecoach from Boston. The Fords also owned a hat shop on Ann St. in Boston.

After the arrival of the railroad, the business began to decline. When the last Ford son died, attempts were made to carry on the business, but the store was destroyed by fire in 1921. The mill had burned down 21 years earlier during the 4th of July celebration by the town's youth. During the mill's last years its work was solely confined to weaving.

Ford's Store did not fade away in complete poverty. It still maintained the rich qualities of popularity, especially during the summer months of the early 1900s. Only a year before the fire, in an article about Ford's Store, the *Boston Evening Transcript* summed up its qualities: "Today the store is still able to maintain its aristocratic demeanor, like an illustrious family with a long list of achievements to rest upon, its patronage secure, having no need of putting on flourishes to attract attention."

This summer a little of Ford's Store will live again. Through the efforts of Shirley Amory and Barbara Root, co-chairmen of the Ford's Store exhibit, they will recreate an atmosphere typical to the store during the height of its popularity. This particular exhibit does generate an extra interest to Alice Hoyt and Fred Potter because as youngsters they remember Ford's Store when they summered in Duxbury.

If anyone is interested in donating or loaning any articles toward the Ford's Store exhibit such as an old calendar (1860s-1900), gingham, mocha mugs, old bottles, baskets, kerosene hurricane lamps, tin boxes, glass cases, pitchers, bowls (not too large), shaving mugs, dress goods, hoop skirts, table linen, white goods, braided rugs (small), hats or caps, small wares, flannels, shawls, table linen, night caps, wigs, pill boxes, or any kind of goods, either authentic or replicas, then contact Shirley Amory. Articles on loan will be returned after Labor Day.

"Duxbury's Heritage" will feature interesting niches besides the Ford's Store exhibit. They will represent various times and developments from our historic past. These will be discussed in future weeks.

Alice Hoyt will step down this August as chairman of all the ladies' committees after 4 years of successful leadership and dedication. Her experience with the Museum of Fine Arts has been invaluable to the Society. Assisting Alice during this summer Heritage series will be Frederick Potter, Franklin Hoyt and Richmond Wight. Shirley Amory and Barbara Root are co-chairmen of the Ford's Store exhibit. Polly Nash is chairman of the Bradford Niches, and Early Communities. Cherry Dahlgreen is assisting in painting and decorating and Penny Kriegel is responsible for costumes.

Their combined efforts will ensure success that makes Duxbury's proud history shine for all to enjoy.